Chapter 1:
The Total Social Fact

(...) Things are not what they seem to be. (...) Social reality turns out to have many layers of meaning. The discovery of each new layer changes the perception of the whole.

(Peter L. Berger)[1]

According to Marcel Mauss, a total social fact (French *fait social total*) covers various ways of manifesting what is social.[2] Perceiving social phenomena in a holistic way is to compare, discover, seek relations and correlations between specific elements of the studied area. This does not pertain, however, to a simple sum of various aspects of some freely selected fact, but to each element be interpreted not separately but in reference to a broader structure of the examined phenomenon. To study the concrete thing – that is wholeness.

Mauss wrote that a total social fact is embodied in an individual experience. We are talking here about two perspectives on this experience; first, it is about an individual story, and second – a total fact is embodied in what Claude Lévi-Strauss calls 'anthropology' understood as "a system of interpretation accounting for the aspects of all modes of behaviour simultaneously, physical, physiological, psychical and sociological."[3] A total social fact is hence a concept that arises due to the aspiration to connect society to an individual, that which is social to that which is mental.

Although among many sociologists the social fact postulate is seen as a sociological utopia, the approach proposed by Mauss seems inspiring.[4] The 'total' approach was also pointed out by Anna Wyka in her work on the necessity of multi-stage and multifaceted research. "A research process (or a research subject

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[1] P.L. Berger, *An Invitation to Sociology: A Humanistic Perspective*, Bantam Doubleday, New York 1963, p. 23.

[2] C. Lévi-Strauss, *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss*, trans. F. Baker, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1987, pp. 24–30.

[3] *Ibidem*, p. 26.

[4] J. Szacki, *Historia myśli socjologicznej*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2004, p. 404.

– an individual, a group) is no longer reduced to a single verbal statement, an approach, a view. The subject is seen in a broader context of one's own life, action, relations with other people."[5] Hence, it boils down to studying social reality as a certain entirety, tapping into many sources, referring to various research tools and, most of all, not tearing its individual elements (e.g., art and life) apart.

The category proposed by Mauss seems important in studies on the non--hermetic, heterogeneous and ever-changing field that is popular culture.[6] The 'total' approach is advocated by, among others, Richard Shusterman, who in *Pragmatist Aesthetics* postulates that popular art[7] should be considered a fragment of an overall social process.[8] For art is manifested in social reality and not outside of it. Shusterman wishes to see art as an element of social life, 'something' we participate in, although at times, we do so unaware of it. In line with these assumptions, one ought to abandon modernist dogmas that consider art to be an object of some kind (including the division into higher and lower culture) and see it in a holistic, processual way. To see it and examine it as a process that encompasses an artist together with his materials, media and the idea, as well as a work of art and purposes for which an artist can use her/his work of art.[9] A work of art may be analysed in terms of the aesthetic content or lack; nevertheless, we can obtain a far comprehensive and richer picture when we attempt to reach seemingly invisible, yet multivocal and multi-layered subtleties.[10] This is because, although some-

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[5] A. Wyka, *W poszukiwaniu nowych wzorów badań społecznych*, in: A. Wyka, A. Sułek (eds.), *Poza granicami socjologii ankietowej*, Uniwersytet Warszawski, Warszawa 1989, pp. 319–335.

[6] The phenomenon described as "popular culture" does not constitute a homogeneous stable subject, but a certain variable configuration of various traits and elements that together make up general culture (in anthropological sense), which will ensure global social communication, removing social, economic, technological, logical and semiotic barriers. Its fundamental criterion is popularity, "This culture is then intended for everyone and for each person it is characterised by initiation availability and easily attainable communication skills. It is an open culture and, in some sense, a universal one." See: K. Dmitruk, *Kultura popularna*, in: T. Żabski (ed.), *Słownik literatury popularnej*, Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Polonistyki Wrocławskiej, Wrocław 1997, pp. 197–198.

[7] Shusterman considers products of popular culture to be works of art; he uses the term "popular culture" to refer to, among others, rock, rap and hip-hop music. On the other hand, he avoids using the term "mass culture", which, contrary to "popular culture" or "popular art", bears more negative connotations (associations evoked by the word 'mass'). For more information on the terminology and popular art as an aesthetic challenge. See: R. Shusterman, *Form and Funk: The Aesthetic Challenge of Popular Art*, "The British Journal of Aesthetics" 1991, vol. 31, no. 3, pp. 203–213, DOI: 10.1093/bjaesthetics/31.3.213.

[8] A. Chmielewski, *Życie – sztuka – filozofia*, in: R. Shusterman, *Estetyka pragmatyczna. Żywe piękno i refleksja nad sztuką*, trans. A. Chmielewski, E. Ignaczak, L. Koczanowicz, Ł. Nysler, A. Orzechowski, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, Wrocław 1998, p. XVI.

[9] *Ibidem*.

[10] Shusterman gives an example of rock music, which he suggests to consider with due account of its origins. See: R. Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*, Blackwell, Oxford 1992.

times perceived as a symbol of kitsch and hence, a threat to the 'real' (elite) art, popular art is in fact a carrier of many significant and often implicit meanings.[11]

Identification of some of these veiled 'subtleties' that popular culture carries within is the primary goal of this book. By directing my attention to Michael Jackson's public image, I am interested in the way in which Jackson, due to media rumours, is perceived in collective awareness. Who is he to the public? To answer this question, I shall investigate the discourse focused on the idol. Therefore, the object of my interest is not that much the fact of Jackson's popularity itself and child sexual molestation allegations he was faced with[12], but primarily the social reception of the idol, reactions that the former king of pop, now degraded to the position of a self-proclaimed king, evokes among the public worldwide.

Why the Internet?

If we accept the broad definition of a source as all traces of reality[13], the Internet is one of the most interesting and, seemingly, inexhaustible data sources.

Certainly today no one needs to be persuaded that the Internet serves as an important communication tool. Lev Manovich writes that as the carrier of cultural globalisation, the Internet eliminates cultural differences and, consequently, combines what is new and what is old to form various systems.[14] Hence, cultural forms and contents, national cultural traditions and even emotions become mixed up. The digital space of the Internet is an area of creative tension where – as Manovich emphasises – the most significant threads of human history all come into one.

Online forums and focus groups, the possibility to comment on recent events, ongoing confrontation with opinions of other Internet users are evidence not only of new communication ways and techniques, but also contribute to immediate (spontaneous) expression of one's own views. They allow each user to leave a trace of one's own 'virtual' presence. Online communication ensures some kind of anonymity in presenting one's opinions and hence it promotes openness – people seem to reveal more of their personal beliefs and views via the Internet than

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[11] As Joanna Tokarska-Bakir noted, "Mass culture (…) is an invaluable source of truth about increasingly better veiled world. Mass culture jibber-jabbers but in truth, it just cannot lie; it spills the beans sooner or later. You only have to be patient and listen." See: J. Tokarska-Bakir, *Osobna pamięć Polaków*, "Tygodnik Powszechny" 2001, no. 10.

[12] Michael Jackson was accused of sexual molestation of a minor in November 2003. For more information about the trial, see the chapter *People vs. Jackson: The Trial Day by Day*.

[13] I accept after Marceli Handelsman that a source is "perpetuated and preserved trace of a thought, an action or, in the most general approach, of human life." See: M. Handelsman, *Historyka*, 2nd ed., Nakład Gebethnera i Wolffa, Warszawa 1928, p. 44.

[14] L. Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, The MIT Press, Cambridge 2001.

during a face-to-face meeting. These statements of Internet users can be used as data. It is not dependent on researcher's approach, so we can say that we are dealing here with a comfortable situation – Internet users as study participants (more or less aware of their role) provide us with their data themselves.

In the course of examining comments of Internet users, we cannot avoid the question about their validity. Nonetheless, this is a problem that appears in all social research and the Internet is no exception in this respect. Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson point out that "(…) as important as the accuracy or objectivity of an account is what it reveals about the teller's interests, perspectives, presuppositions, and discursive strategies."[15] Falsification is also a significant source of data. A reflexive researcher has to be aware that "(…) all classes of data have their problems, and all are produced socially; none can be treated as 'transparent' representations of 'reality'. The recognition of reflexivity in social research entails such an awareness."[16] Similarly, Dagmara Karcz stresses that, primarily, the very content of statements is evident, where one can notice a mythical outline of human thinking. "Internet entries speak not about the actual relation to social and cultural facts but rather about the way in which the world is perceived, given a meaning and a purpose. (…) These reveal a general human need for a mythical arrangement of our small cosmos."[17] On subsequent pages of this book the reader will find an attempt to arrange and then articulate mythical beliefs about Michael Jackson that are present in online statements.

Internet as a Source of Data

My methodological approach began from reading information and keeping a record of events related first to child sexual abuse allegations against Michael Jackson and then, to the over ten-month long court trial. I gathered information about Jackson's case using various sources, mainly online ones. The news available online served Internet users as topics to be commented on, whereas I was using selected statements made by Internet users to analyse traits of a popular culture hero.

At first glance, it might seem that this book concerns strictly American culture; the theoretical background of considerations in this book is Lasch's 'culture of narcissism'; one of the analytic categories (anthropological figures) is the trickster, a figure from the mythology of North American indigenous people, whereas the research subject is related to Michael Jackson. It is not however, another study

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[15] M. Hammersley, P. Atkinson, *Ethnography Principles in practice*, 3rd ed., Routledge, New York 2007, p. 124.

[16] *Ibidem*, p. 130.

[17] D. Karcz, *www.antropologia.com?*, Barbarzyńca, http://www.barbarzynca.pl/Artukuly/6_17.htm.

in the field of North American Studies. The fact that I have made comments published on Polish websites the area of empirical exploitation shows that American culture has long transgressed the US territory and entered a global level. Globalisation, particularly via new technologies, has allowed Internet users to become part of the global (world) culture.

The statements I have collected – comments on news regarding Michael Jackson published on websites such as gazeta.pl, muzyka.onet.pl, muzyka.wp.pl (Wirtualna Polska), and muzyka.interia.pl – cover the period from November 2003 (Jackson's arrest) to December 2005[18]. I have also undertaken to analyse verbal and graphic comments of fans and haters available on websites (in Polish and English language) 'found' by a search engine.[19] I shall refer to this broad collection of data in general as 'statements'. My aim is to approach the research subject in the most holistic approach possible.

In my analysis, I present only some of these statements. This decision was largely affected by the fact that reading and presenting all statements about Michael Jackson available online is simply impossible. Therefore, I consider the empirical material presented in the book explicitly to constitute examples illustrating the phenomenon of a mythical hero traits of occurring in statements about a pop culture idol.

My intent was not to investigate the highest number of statements but to analyse the content. The primary aim of the reflection I have tasked myself with is to examine cultural contents that appear in statements about Jackson. I am interested in diversity of views and opinions of Internet users – both the regularities that appear and elements that are surprising, odd, etc.

The presented data are generally available. They are characterised by multiple authors[20]; moreover, these statements often are intimate confessions[21] one can allow themselves to reveal only in virtual reality, as that does not bear regret-

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[18] In order to maintain consistency, I use these websites during writing a chapter about Jackson's trial.

[19] After entering the key phrase 'Michael Jackson' into google.com search engine (22 February 2006), a list of about 17,700,000 websites unfolded. (search time 0.29 second) It is hard to say how many of these websites is dedicated entirely to Jackson and how many of them contain the phrase 'Michael Jackson' sporadically in their content. As Zygmunt Bauman notes, when it comes to seeking information using a search engine, we are often dealing with information overload. As he marked, scanning through such a high number of 'available' data is an impossible task, not to mention acquisition, processing and memorization. See: Z. Bauman, *Życie na przemiał*, trans. T. Kunz, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Warszawa 2005, pp. 44–45.

[20] An Internet user who makes an entry has a specified selected nick s/he uses as her/his own name; hence, it serves as her/his 'virtual' identity. (In the case of the comments I have analysed, I had no data about a given user's identity, sex, age, education, etc.).

[21] I consider an intimate confession both 'admitting' to be Jackson's fan (as he was charged with child sexual molestation), as well as all the statements whose authors clearly do not condemn paedophilia.

table consequences for the one who confesses. These statements – which I shall address in the chapters that follow – pertain to a lesser degree one's relationship to Jackson's music and more often to changes in his appearance and child sexual abuse allegations. The object of interest were statements concerning the most spectacular moments of Jackson's trial, such as the moment when the charges were filed and when the verdict was announced. Already at the initial stage of research, I decided not to consider statements that are not directly related to the subject, that is, those pertaining to making music charts (lists of favourite or most hated songs by Jackson), guessing song titles, comments on music and media commercialisation, parenting, sexual experiences, references made to political affairs in Poland, bribery in courts, Americanisation of culture, etc.

The decision to situate the research 'area' in the Internet was backed not only by the fact that the Internet is presently one of the basic and highly popular communication media, but also the fact that the statements were caused by a need to make a statement, to speak one's mind on a given matter. In my opinion, this spontaneity holds the greatest value of this type of a source of knowledge. There is yet another significant reason why I decided to use Internet users' statements as the source material. This reason is directly related to the subject of this book. The Internet, specifically statements made by its users, tell a lot about a post-modern individual, who not only wants to know more and more, be better informed but also, importantly, wishes to mark her/his 'self', wanting to participate, even via virtual reality, in events, celebrations, etc. that s/he finds important.[22]

Lev Manovich compares the Internet user to a *flâneur*[23], a 'saunterer' and someone of the crowd; a figure described by Charles Baudelaire[24] and Walter Benjamin.[25] For Manovich, the situation of the Internet user 'exploring' the virtual world seems analogous to a *flâneur* strolling and window-shopping at the turn of the 20th century. [26] The thing that a *flâneur* has in common with the Internet user is the process of transformation that takes place in the awareness of them both, a transformation of non-virtual reality in a virtual one and *vice versa*. For Manovich, it becomes clear that the world of new media is at present a parallel to a thick urban crowd from the early 20th century. *Flâneur* appears on the street or

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[22] Assistance, that is, a need for participating in a celebration attended by important figures, as Ryszard Kapuściński notices, has become a significant element of our culture. See: R. Kapuściński, *Lapidaria*. Czytelnik, Warszawa 2004, p. 16.

[23] L. Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, op. cit., pp. 231–237.

[24] C. Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Liife*, in: *idem, The Painter of Modern and Other Essays*, trans. and ed. J. Mayne, Phaidon Press, London 1964, pp. 1–40.

[25] W. Benjamin, *Paris, Capital of the 19th Century*, in: *idem, The Arcades Project*, trans. H. Eiland, K. McLaughlin, Harvard University Press, Cambridge–London 1999, pp. 1–27.

[26] In turn, Zygmunt Bauman uses the figure of a *flâneur* to describe "our consumerist way of being in the world." See: Z. Bauman, *Two Sketches on Postmodern Ethics*, Instytut Kultury, Warsaw 1994, p. 23.

in the crowd to observe others and then leaves. Similarly, communication via the Internet can be interrupted or aborted at any moment. Also, it creates many opportunities for self-promotion, since as Manovich puts it, "(…) the virtual flâneur is happiest on the move, clicking from one object to another, traversing room after room, level after level, data volume after data volume."[27] To this end, s/he sends messages to discussion groups and forums, eagerly uses her/his right to speak and voice her/his opinions. Others are her/his audience.

Already at the data collection stage it seemed interesting to me that the possibility to comment on pieces of information is employed by Internet users not solely to express their mind but to 'expose them to the public' and thus to confront opinions of others. Often one user's comment gives rise to subsequent statements. It is *sui generis* a conversation (in the written form), an ongoing dialogue that often random Internet users are holding with each other.[28] What I am particularly interested in is the subject/object of this conversation, as it generates a construct of beliefs about Jackson that are implicitly and explicitly functioning in the public.

Jackson as a Social Fact

In accordance with the definition of the total social fact I intend to approach Michael Jackson from various, though often interconnected perspectives. This shall be attained by means of anthropologic figures of a trickster, a scapegoat, and a carnival king.

Using the above figures, it is worth taking a closer look not only at the diversity of opinions about Jackson (for some Jackson remains a scapegoat, while for others a deviant), but also the very figure of the idol and his biography. In the latter, one can notice a tragedy of a person subjected to ongoing pressure by both his immediate (family and managers) and more distant environment (the public). Jackson is an entrapped idol drawn to the extreme in some sense, at least in terms of physical appearance. Confessions he shared in an interview with Martin Bashir, "I would have been happier wearing a mask", "Everything can be strange to someone", certainly are not unimportant in the analysis of the 'phenomenon' Jackson has become.[29]

This book is a voice that neither advocates nor condemns Michael Jackson. I do not intend to take a stance regarding his fault or innocence. The task I choose

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[27] L. Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, op. cit., p. 235.

[28] Nonetheless, this conversation does not take place in real time; on the contrary, it is characterised by asynchronicity. An entry is not only a comment of a specific piece of information but also a reply, a discussion with previous (already existing) comments.

[29] J. Shaw, *Living with Michael Jackson*, Granada Television, 2003.

to challenge myself with is solely to interpret a career of a cultural hero Jackson is an example of. I would like to attempt to make certain stages of this career embedded in the mythical pattern of a biography, well-described by means of the three mentioned anthropological figures. This is obviously related to a certain interpretation which, however, does not aspire to come across as infallible. The starting point of this interpretation is a reflection on the condition of late-modern culture, which I call after Christopher Lasch the 'culture of narcissism'.[30]

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[30] C. Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations,* W.W. Norton & Company, New York 1991.